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FOREIGN INFLUENCE ON SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

"It may be reckoned as the progress of the twentieth century beyond the nineteenth, that it begins with a general confession of the futility of that criticism what has too long been exercised upon the sonnets of Shakespeare." With these words our lamented Professor Price opens his essay on the "Technic of Shakespeare's Sonnets!" "The gain is likely to be great," he goes on to say, "For, so soon as the world ceases to seek in the sonnets for morbid details of the poet's biography, and for the revelation of his adventures and intrigues, those poems assume their true value as works of art."

Legitimate criticism hereafter will have to regard them as such, and one task which the critic of the sonnets will have to undertake — perhaps not the most charming one, yet an interesting one nevertheless, and a necessary one — is the study of their sources, of their relations to previous similar works. For Shakespeare's sonnets were not an isolated phenomenon, any more than his plays and any more than any other works of art. As a matter of fact, the magnitude of the sonnetteering vogue in Europe in the sixteenth century is simply startling.

When Charles VIII entered Rome in 1494 — immediately after the reign of Lorenzo di Medici, glorious in the annals of art and literature — he inaugurated a long series of expeditions which revealed to France the literary and artistic treasures of Italy. The most popular poet of the peninsula was Petrarch, and several causes presently operated to make him the literary idol of Europe.

In 1521, upon the death of Leo X, the Florentine academicians were compelled for political reasons to seclude themselves. Having nothing better to do, they decided to devote their time to the study of Petrarch. A word or a line became a topic for endless commentary and disquisition. Thus the subtle conceits of the poet were made prominent and probably multiplied, and Petrarchism became a fashion. There was upon the throne of

France at this time, a monarch, Francis I, whose heart's desire was to re-establish the age of chivalry, with its glitter, its troubadours, its courts of love. His court became the haunt of idle lords who vied with each other in writing complimentary verses to the idle ladies. Now, inasmuch as idle lords are not especially gifted with fecundity of ideas, they would not of course be at all backward in availing themselves of the storehouse of conceits afforded by Petrarch and the Petrarchists. Indeed, these latter day troubadours could hardly have gone to a more appropriate source for material suited to their purpose. For Petrarch's lyric work was after all only the rich fruit of a plant whose main root lay in France, planted there by the troubadours. The French writers therefore went to that fruit as to a birthright, led the stem back to its original soil, where it again took root and was again destined to send off a runner into foreign domain — this time to England.

About the middle of the century, seven French poets, full of Renaissance enthusiasm, organized a circle which they called the *Brigade*—a name afterwards changed to *Pléiade*—and after a rigid study of the classics they came to the conclusion that the salvation of French literature lay in the creation of an adequate literary or, more strictly, poetic language. This they proceeded to effect, and Tuscany, where such an end had already been accomplished, offered a ready model. Petrarch now assumed a more significant prominence than he had in the court of Francis I, for the *Pléiade* consisted of genuine poets, having as its leaders such great men as Ronsard and Du Bellay.

In 1549, that body issued its famous manifesto, the *Deffense et Illustration de la Langue Françoise*, written by Du Bellay. In it the author, after declaring the value of classical models, proclaims: *Sonne moy ces beaux sonnets, non moins docte que plaisante Invention Italienne. . . . Pour le Sonnet donques tu as Petrarque et quelques modernes Italiens.*

Petrarch thus became the idol, not only of the *Pléiade*, but also of the large school of sonnetteers that grew up under its influence. In his preface to *L'Olive*, a collection of sonnets, Du Bellay expressly admits having imitated Petrarch.

Ronsard speaks of his lady's glory, *Qu'un seul tusquan est*

digne de toucher'.¹ But illustrations abound too plentifully to have justice done them by a few quotations. Of the disciples of the *Pléiade*, Desportes must be mentioned, not only because he was the greatest, but also because of the influence he exerted in England.

While the above mentioned idle lords of the court of Francis I were getting the best they could out of Italy, Englishmen were doing the same thing. The Italian Renaissance was in full swing, and it became fashionable for young men who could afford it to take a trip to Italy to complete their education. The effect of this practice upon English society may be judged by the fact that Roger Ascham said "an Italianate Englishman is an incarnate devil." No doubt there was much in the conduct of travellers returned from Italy to justify the good Roger Ascham's calling them names; nevertheless, the result of this Italian contact for English poetry was on the whole salutary. In the first half of the sixteenth century the English language was in as crude a state as the French, and the beautiful Italian tongue then discovered served as a model and inspiration to both. Wyatt and Surrey, some time before 1542 (the year of the former's death) showed the good effects of Italian influence by writing a number of sonnets in a style which broke utterly with English tradition and which may be enjoyed by twentieth century readers. Notice that this date is six years before Du Bellay wrote his *Deffense*; but many circumstances combined to postpone the completion of the work begun by these two pioneers. Wyatt died a young man in 1542, and in 1547, Henry VIII, a few days before his death, prevented Surrey, then only thirty years old, from writing any more sonnets, by having his head removed.

The sonnets which they had written remained in manuscript, for it was not then customary to print poetry. There followed a period of English history which reminds one of the Puritan ascendancy, and it had a corresponding effect upon literature. When, finally, the forces which made the Elizabethan Age great, began to operate, English poetry was still in its rude state, while the French *Pléiade* had already produced its best work; so that

¹Amours, I. 8

English poets now had two guides instead of one — the French, in addition to the Italian — and they took advantage of both with a will. Sonnetteering became such a rage that even Shakespeare could not resist trying his hand at it; and it is the purpose of this paper to indicate the influence which the foreign sonnet-teers had upon him.

A recent writer — Vaganay — has estimated that two hundred thousand sonnets were written in Europe between 1530 and 1650. The topic of most of them was love. Remembering that the subject of love was not limited to the sonnet form, we are prepared to expect a monotony of sentiment. If we bear in mind, moreover, that the new inspiring ideal which the French found in Italian poetry, and which the English found in both Italian and French poetry, was not one of content, but the then more important one of form, of language, not only is our expectation strengthened, but any inclination to censure such monotony disappears.

Sonnet writing became an intellectual exercise, and was recognized as such by the writers themselves. Giles Fletcher, in the 'Epistle Dedicatorie' of his "Licia" says: ". . . take this by the waie. . . . A man may writ of love, and not be in love, as well as of husbandrie, and not goe to plough; or of witches and be none: or of holinesse and be flat prophane."

A large number of such confessions by English writers are quoted by Mr. Sidney Lee, and also some illustrations of the artificiality and conventionality of the practice, including some delightful ones by Shakespeare himself. But there is one by the latter which Mr. Lee does not give, and which deserves to be quoted because it is the only one (I believe) found in the sonnets.

It is from Sonnet 21:

So is it not with me, as with that muse,
Stirr'd by a painted beauty to his verse;
Who heaven itself for ornament doth use;
And every fair with his fair doth rehearse;
Making a couplement of proud compare,
With sun and moon, with earth and sea's rich gems,
With April's first-born flowers, and all things rare
That heaven's air in this huge rondure hems.

O let me, true in love, but truly write,
 And then believe me, my love is as fair
 As any mother's child, though not so bright
 As those gold candles fix'd in heaven's air.

This reminds one of the words of one of the greatest of the French Petrarchists — Du Bellay — in his poem entitled *Contre les Pétrarquistes*:

J'ay oublié l'art de petrarquiser,
 Je veux d'amour franchement deviser,
 Sans vous flatter et sans me deguïser.

 De vos beautez, je diray seulement
 Que, si mon oeil ne juge folement,
 Vostre beauté est joincte esgalement
 A vostre bonne grace.

And he continues on the Petrarchist's expression of his feelings, suffering caused by her cruel disdain.²

For a parade of the ridiculous praise showered by the Petrarchist upon his imagined love, we might quote another French poet, where Saint-Gelais addresses his lady trying to make her reasonable.³

The exaggerations enumerated in these selections need not be specifically illustrated.⁴ They constitute the warp and woof of sonnetteering. Take up any collection of love-sonnets, turn to any page, and you will find examples. Therefore indebtedness concerning them cannot be traced. It is only in the case of special conceits that indebtedness can be determined, and to such we shall now turn.

PLATONIC CONCEITS

It was mentioned above that Petrarch became a subject of detailed study with the Florentine Academicians. The fact is peculiarly significant. As the name implies, the Academicians

²*Œuvres Françaises du Joachim Du Bellay*, ed. Marty-Laveaux, II, pp. 333 ff.

³*Œuvres de Melin de Saint-Gelays*, ed. Blanchemain, I, p. 196.

⁴Illustrations from Shakespeare, 1. suffering of lover, 61, 145, 139, 147, 153; 2. praise of beloved, 43, 53, 59, 67, 68, 69, 82, 83, 84, 99. Cf. Plato, *Phædrus*, 251.

were students of Plato. I have been unable to get specific information as to what they did with Petrarch, but it is just to suppose that they read as much of Plato into him as they possibly could. Finding in him an ideal of love which was spiritual, how could they help connecting it, perhaps confusing it, with Plato's ideal of love. However that may be, the fact remains that the contact of the erotic ideal of Dante and Petrarch with Renaissance Platonics, produced a theory of what may be called Neo-Platonic love — not Platonic love, which was something essentially different — and this served as a source of some of the most important conceits found in sonnet literature.

THE USE MADE OF PLATO'S THEORY OF IDEAS

In Sonnet 53, Shakespeare says:

What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange *shadows* on you tend?
Since every one hath, every one, one shade,
And you, but one, can every *shadow* lend.

and in Sonnet 98, after enumerating beautiful features of nature:

They were but sweet, but figures of delight,
Drawn after you — you, pattern of all these.
Yet seem'd it winter still, and you away,
As with your *shadow*, I with these did play.

In Sonnet 37:

So then I am not lame, poor, nor despised,
Whilst that this *shadow* doth such substance give
That I by thy abundance am sufficed
And by a part of all thy glory live.

“ ‘Shadow’ (Latin, *umbra*) was the term of art in Renaissance Platonism for the Reflection of the Eternal Type.”⁵ Here Shakespeare makes his beloved the archetype of the beautiful forms in this world. Spenser does about the same thing in Sonnet 35:

All this world's glory seemeth vayne to me,
And all their shoves but shadowes, saving she.

⁵Wyndham, “Poems of Shakespeare,” CXXII, note 1. Cf. Drayton's, “Idea,” 13: “To the Shaddow.”

This identification of the beloved with the Idea was a bold step in advance of the French sonnetteers. They had contented themselves with exalting the Idea which was the model of their mistress.⁶

The citation given above from Du Bellay's *Contre les Pétrarquistes* affords another example. Even Petrarch offers one.⁷

The favor which the notion of the "Idea" found is seen also in the titles of cycles; sometimes the word itself was used, sometimes an anagram of the French form. The following list illustrates this and also the English imitation of the French: Scève: Délie; Daniel: Delia; Du Bellay: L'Idée; Drayton: Idea; Linche: Diella.

THE IMAGE OF THE BELOVED ON THE LOVER'S HEART

This conceit was a corollary to Plato's doctrine of the subjectivity of beauty. In one place at least, Plato states the very notion used by the sonnetteers: "The lover is his mirror in whom he (the beloved) is beholding himself."⁸

So Spenser, "Amoretti," 45:

. . . Within my hart, though hardly it can shew
 Thing so divine to vew of earthly eye:
 The fayre Idea of your celestiall hew,
 And every part remaines immortally.

and Sidney, Sonnet 32:

But from thy heart, while my sire charmeth thee,
 Sweet Stella's image I do steal to me.

Parallel passages are readily found in Ronsard.⁹

The sixth Sonnet of Ronsard's *Astrée* introduces a new figure:

Il ne falloit, maistresse, autres tablettes
 Pour vous graver que celles de mon coeur,
 Ou de sa main, Amour nostre vainqueur
 Vous a gravée et vos graces parfaites.

⁶Ronsard, *Amours*, I, 26, 167; Du Bellay, *L' Olive*, 113 (translated from a sonnet of Bernadino Daniello; also translated by Desportes), 112. Cf. Vianey, *Les sources italiennes de "L'Olive"*, 1901, pp. 76, 104; Plato's *Symposium*, 211.

⁷*Vita di M. Laura*, Sonnet, 108.

⁸Plato, *Phaedrus*, 255.

⁹Ronsard, *Amours*, I, 178; II, 21.

It was probably this sonnet of Ronsard's that was imitated by Shakespeare in Sonnets 24 and 122. In the latter he modified the idea somewhat:

Thy gift, thy tables, are within my brain
Full character'd with lasting memory,
Which shall above that idle rank remain,
Beyond all date, even to eternity:
Or, at the least, so long as brain and *heart*
Have faculty by nature to subsist;
Till *each* to razed oblivion yield his part
Of thee, thy record never can be miss'd.

Sonnet 24 is more strained and conventional than either of these. It begins:

Mine eye hath play'd the painter, and hath stell'd
Thy beauty's form in table of my heart . . .

IDENTITY OF LOVER AND BELOVED

To this theme Shakespeare has devoted, more or less completely, eight sonnets: 36, 39, 42, 62, 96, 109, 133, 134. The theme itself is suggested by Plato in his "Symposium" (192, 193); but the spirituality of the idea, perhaps the idea itself, is entirely Neo-Platonic, evolved out of the mediæval mystic doctrine of the soul's union with God. This doctrine is the culmination of the "Divine Comedy," and is directly expressed in a sermon by the mediæval German mystic, Master Eckart:

"I am one with Him — He cannot exclude me. . . . God and I are one in knowing. God's essence is His knowing, and God's knowing makes me to know Him. Therefore is his knowing my knowledge. The eye whereby I see God is the same eye whereby He seeth me. Mine eye and the eye of God are one eye, one vision, one knowledge, and one love."¹⁰

The honest chronicler (Adolf Arnstein) recording this sermon, remarks: "Of all this I can understand scarcely anything," and we needn't cudgel our brains about it either, provided we understand the main point. Man is identified with God. In mystic theology, God and the human soul bear the relation of bride-

¹⁰Vaughan, "Hours with the Mystics," pp. 190, 192. Cf. also St. Bernard, "Sermons on the Song of Songs;" "Sermons" 71, 81, 82, 83.

groom and bride, to each other.¹¹ Hence the bridegroom and bride—or the lover and beloved—are one. With Dante and Petrarch, the beloved was exalted to such a degree that she became a symbol of the lover's noblest thoughts and highest aspirations; and then under mystic influence, she was identified with them. We thus have a suggestion of how the idea of the union of the soul with the divine beloved, as we find it in St. Bernard, developed into the idea of the union of the soul with the human beloved, as we find it in Shakespeare.

Drayton uses the theme in Sonnet 11:

Since you one were, I never since was one,
Since you in me, myselfe since out of me,
Transported from my selfe into your being. . .

UNITY OF TRUE, BEAUTIFUL AND GOOD

Fair, kind, and true, is all my argument,
Fair, kind, and true, varying to other words.¹²

With Dante and Petrarch Love is a noble power, and its elevating force is sometimes explicitly proclaimed.¹³

The Renaissance Platonists, too, regarded it as an ennobling influence. We have royal confirmation of this. Lorenzo di Medici, in an essay on Love, declares: "Now Love is so far from being reprehensible, that, on the contrary, it is the surest indication of a noble and lofty mind; and a special cause that allures and excites men to the active practice of the virtues which dwell in the soul."¹⁴

With this may be compared two of Ronsard's Sonnets:

Ere love from barren Chaos drew the skies,
Piercing its womb that hid the light of day,
Beneath primeval earth's and water's sway
The shapeless Heavens lay whelmed, in dark disguise.
Even so my sluggish soul, too dull to rise,
Within this body's gross and heavy clay
Without or form or feature shapeless lay
Until Love's arrow pierced it from your eyes.

¹¹St. Bernard, "Sermon on the Song of Songs."

¹²Shakespeare, Sonnet 105; cf. also Sonnet 101.

¹³Petrarch I. 10 and 56, II. 18; cf. Plato, "Symposium" 178.

¹⁴Foscolo, "Essays on Petrarch," p. 261.

Love brought me life and power and truth and light,
 Made pure my inmost heart through his control
 And shaped my being to a perfect whole.
 He warms my veins, he lights my thought, his flight
 Snatches me upward, till in Heaven's height
 I find the ordered pathway of my soul.¹⁵

And again:

I dragged my life along with sullen sighs
 In heaviness of body and of soul,
 Knowing not yet the Muse's high control
 And honor that she brings her votaries,
 Until the hour I loved you. Then your eyes
 Became my guide to lead to virtue's goal,
 Where I might win that knowledge fair and whole
 Which by true loving makes men nobly wise.

 O love, my all, if aught of good I do,
 If worthily of your dear eyes I write,
 You are the cause, yours is the potency.
 My perfect grace comes ever but from you,
 You are my spirit! If I work aright
 'Tis you that do it, you that work in me.¹⁶

But the pure spirituality of the passion as displayed in Dante and Petrarch is tempered by the sixteenth century sonnetteers, for in the meantime other forces had been at work. The one great thing which the Renaissance accomplished, was the revelation of man to himself, and he discovered that he had a body of which he could be as proud as of his mind, and which was just as essential to his being. The viciousness of the immediate effects of this revelation, may be read in the history of the time, especially in the history of Italy where the Renaissance forces were most violent. We may be sure, therefore, that had not the causes indicated above made Petrarch the worshipped idol, the tone of the whole mass of amatory poetry of the sixteenth century would have been quite different from what it was. The Neo-Platonic theory of love emphasized, indeed, the higher elements of the passion, but it left the door open for the admission of the lower. This may be well illustrated from the essay by

¹⁵Ronsard, *Amours*, I, 52, translated by Dr. C. H. Page.

¹⁶Ronsard, *Amours* I, 100, translated by Dr. C. H. Page; cf. also Ronsard, *Helene*, II, 2; Drayton, "Idea," 35; Petrarch, II, 86.

Lorenzo, cited above: "Beauty of countenance and mind is the principle and guide, which leads man to seek for beauty in other objects, to mount up to virtue, which is beauty half earthly, half divine, and come at last to repose in the sovereign beauty, that is, God."

At that time, "beauty of countenance" was likely to become the prime consideration, especially when Lorenzo says in the same paper: "Whoever seeks for the true definition of love, discovers it to be only — *a desire of the beautiful*. And if this be the case, vice and deformity, in every shape, must be disgusting to him who truly loves."

This view was willingly accepted by the sonnetteers, and the thought of the destruction of beauty through the encroachment of Time became popular with them, giving rise to the conceit of "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may." This is the theme of all of Shakespeare's sonnets importuning his friend to marry betimes. It was a favorite of Daniel's:

When men shall find thy flower, thy glory passe,
And thou with carefull brow sitting alone:
Received hast this message from thy glasse,
That tells the truth, and says that all is gone;
Thou maist repent that thou hast scornd my teares,
When winter snowes upon thy sable haire.¹⁷

This is evidently an imitation of what is perhaps the best sonnet on this theme. It is a well-known sonnet by Ronsard (*Helene*, II, 42), worthily translated by Dr. Page:

When you are very old, by the hearth's glare,
At candle-time, spinning and winding thread,
You'll sing my lines, and say, astonished:
Ronsard made these for me, when I was fair
Then not a servant even, with toil and care
Almost outworn, hearing what you have said,
Shall fail to start awake and lift her head
And bless your name with deathless praise fore'er.

My bones shall be in earth, and my poor ghost
Take its long rest where love's dark myrtles thrive.
You, crouching by the fire, old, shrunken, grey,
Shall we your proud disdain and my love lost. . . .

¹⁷Daniel, "Delia," 41; *Ibid*, 39, 40, 50.

Nay, hear me, love! — Wait not tomorrow — live,
And pluck life's roses, oh! to-day, to-day.¹⁸

And in another passage from Ronsard,

. . . even your beauties in their flower-array
Ere little time must fade and fall away. . . .
Then love me while thou 'rt fair, ere youth is gone!¹⁹

This theme is closely connected with another known as the "eternizing theme." The latter is properly divided into two:

I. Time Destroying the Beloved's Beauty, but the Memory of it Living in His Verse.

To this theme Shakespeare has devoted Sonnets 15, 16, 17, 19, 54, 63, 65, 77, 100, 101.

It is also to be found in Daniel's "Delia:"

When winter snowes upon thy sable haire,
And frost of age hath nipt thy beauties neere, . . .
Then take this picture which I here present thee, . . .
This may remain thy lasting monument,
Which happily posterity may cherrish,
These colours with thy fading are not spent, . . .
They will remaine, and so thou canst not die.²⁰

II. Immortality Promised by the Poet.

To this conceit Shakespeare has devoted Sonnets 18, 38, 54, 55, 74, 81, 107.

It is used by Spenser in his "Amoretti," at least twice:

My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,
And in the heavens write your glorious name.²¹

And again :

Even this verse, vowd to eternity,
Shall be thereof immortal moniment;
And tell her praise to all posterity,²² . . .

¹⁸Cf. also Ronsard, *Helene*, II, 44, translated by Dr. Page under the title, "Helen's Beauty;" *Pièces retranchées*, 56.

¹⁹*Pièces retranchées*, XVII (Blanchmain, I, 397). The translation is Dr. Page's.

²⁰Daniel, "Delia," 42; also 45, and 38. The last is a translation of a sonnet by Desportes, *Cleonice*, 62. Cf. also the conceit in *Cleonice*, 63: "He will not burn his verses . . . because the same flame would also make the fame of his lady die."

²¹"Amoretti," 75.

²²*Ibid*, 69.

The conceit is frequent enough in other poets, both French and English: Ronsard,²³ DuBellay,²⁴ Daniel,²⁵ and Drayton.²⁶ An example may be given, in Dr. Page's translation, from Ronsard's *Helene*, II, 2:

That century to century may tell
 The perfect love Ronsard once bore to you,
 How he was reason-reft for love of you
 And thought it freedom in your chains to dwell;
 That age on age posterity full well
 May know my veins were filled with beauty of you
 And that my heart's one wish was only you,
 I bring for gift to you this immortelle.

 Long will it live in freshness of its prime,
 And you shall live, through me, long after death —
 So can the well-skilled lover conquer Time,
 Who loving you all virtue followeth,
 Like Laura, you shall live the cynosure
 Of earth, so long as pens and books endure.

In Sonnets 38, 74, 107 of Shakespeare, 44 of Daniel, and 44 of Drayton, the poet suggests his own immortality through his verse, something which finds its counterpart again in Ronsard.²⁷

APPROACHING AGE OF THE LOVER

This was a favorite theme. It is rather difficult to see why a passionate lover should persist in proclaiming the advanced state of his years, but the sonnetteers yield some data by which to determine how the convention probably arose. The lover did not imagine that the plea of old age would gain the favor of his sweetheart. He merely wanted to impress upon her the fact that he had loved her so *many* years, and that, nevertheless, the fire within his bosom, had no whit abated.

This use of the theme is taken from Petrarch (I, 143), and he is followed by Du Bellay (*Amours*, 14). Petrarch also set the example of making a straightforward confession of old age (II, 81).

²³Ronsard, *Amours*, I, 193 (Dr. Page's "Love Recording").

²⁴DuBellay, *Amours*, 11; *L' Olive*, Ode 13.

²⁵Daniel, "Delia," 43 and 44.

²⁶Drayton, "Idea," 44.

²⁷Ronsard, *Amours* I, 72: translated by Dr. C. H. Page under the title, "Her Immortality."

But he could afford to do this. In the first place, Laura was dead; and in the next place, she had given birth to ten children before she died. His English imitators seemed to be backward about adopting such unnecessary frankness, consequently they modified the idea somewhat; representing their old age as premature, and caused by the cruel disdain of the object of their affections.²⁹

Thus Daniel says in "Delia," 30:

My cares draw on mine everlasting night,
In horrors sable clowdes sets my lives sunne:

I go before into the Mirtle shades,
To attend the presence of my world's Deere;

If any aske me why so soone I came,
He hide her sinne and say it was my lot:

Shakespeare uses the unrestricted "old age" theme in the sonnets addressed to a man—in Sonnets 22, 62, 73; including one of the most beautiful he ever wrote (73), the one beginning:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

But when he addresses a woman, he tells a different story (Sonnet 138):

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her, though I know she lies,
That she might think me some untutor'd youth,
Unlearn'd in the world's false subtleties.
Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
Although she knows my days are past the best,
Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue:
On both sides thus is simple truth suppress'd.
But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
And wherefore say not I that I am old?
O, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
And age in love loves not to have years told.

²⁹Cf. also Drayton, "Idea" 15, 44.

THE DARK LADY THEME

In actual life to-day, a dark-complexioned woman may be considered as beautiful as a light-complexioned one. Many, indeed, prefer a brunette. Yet poets have up to the very present persisted in picturing maidens who, if they corresponded to the description, were much too ghastly for company. In the sonnet literature under consideration, affectionate addresses to a dark lady are few. This may be due to the influence of Neo-Platonism, according to which, "beauty" and "light" are synonymous.²⁹

Instances, however, may be found in Ronsard's *Amours* (I, 26), and in Sidney's "Astrophel and Stella" (Sonnet 7).

When Nature made her chiefe worke, Stella's eyes,
In colour blacke why wrapt she beames so bright?
Would she, in beamy blacke, like Painter wise,
Frame daintiest lustre, mixt of shades and light?
Or did she else that sober hue devise,
In object best to knitt and strength our sight;
Lesat, if no vaile these brave gleames did disguise.
They, sunlike, should more dazle than delight?
Or would she her miraculous power show,
That, whereas blacke seeme's beautie's contrary,
She even in blacke doth make all beauties flow?
But so, and thus,—she, minding Love should be
Placed ever there, gave him this mourning weede
To honor all their deathes who for her bleed.

Shakespeare undoubtedly had in mind the latter poem, when he wrote Sonnets 127 and 132.

Milton uses the conceit of dazzling in "Il Penseroso" (13-16). Had the sonnetteers possessed Milton's erudition, and had Prince Memnon, his sister, and Cassiopeia, been impressed upon them, I might have had more examples to quote.³⁰

THE FOUR ELEMENTS

References to the elements—earth, water, air, and fire—are made in Shakespeare's Sonnets, 44, 45. Another reference may be found in Spenser's "Amoretti," 55:

²⁹Cf. Spenser, "Hymn to Heavenly Beauty."

³⁰Professor Trent informs me that Lord Herbert of Cherbury's poems also praise dark beauties.

I marvaile of what substance was the mould
The which her maide attonce so cruell fair.
Not earth; for her high thoughts more heavenly are:
Not water; for her love doth burne like fyre:
Not ayre; for she is not so light or rare:
Not fyre; for she doth friese with faint desire.
Then needs another element inquire,
Whereof she mote be made; that is, the skye.³¹

CONCORD AND DISCORD BETWEEN EYE AND HEART

This theme is treated in Shakespeare's Sonnets 24, 46, 47, 132, 137, 141; and in Drayton's "Idea," 33:

Whilst yet mine eies doe surfet with delight,
My wofull hart imprisond in my brest,
Wisheth to be transformed in my sight,
That it like those, by looking might be blest. . .³²

Other conceits may be briefly enumerated:

IMAGE OF BELOVED EVER PRESENT

This appears in Shakespeare's Sonnets, 43, 47, 61, 113; in Sidney's "Atrophel and Stella," 38; Lodge's "Phyllis" 36, a translation of Desportes, *Diane*, II, 3; Ronsard, *Mort de Marie*, 11.

INADEQUACY OF HIS POWER TO SING HER PRAISES

Shakespeare's Sonnets, 79, 80, 82, 83, 85, 86, 103, 106; Spenser, "Amoretti" 82; Du Bellay, *Amours*, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10; Ronsard, *Amours*, I, 72 — the sonnet entitled "Her Immortality" in Dr. Page's translation; *Amours*, I, 170; Petrarch, II, 39.

MERIT OF HIS VERSE DUE TO THE BELOVED

Shakespeare's Sonnets, 38, 79; Ronsard, *Amours*, I, 100, 170; Du Bellay, *Amours*, 12; Jodelle, *Amours*, 39; Baïf, *Francine* (Ed. Marty-Laveaux, I, p. 112); Petrarch, II, 88.

NATURE HAS NO ATTRACTIONS IN HER ABSENCE

Shakespeare's Sonnets, 97, 98; Drummond of Hawthornden,

³¹Other references may be found in Barnes' "Parthenophil," Sonnet 77, and Greville's "Cælica," Sonnet 7; also in Du Bellay, *Contre les Pétraquistes*, II, 336.

³²Cf. *Ibid.*, 52; Barnes' "Parthenophil," 20; Watson, "Tears of Francie," 19, 20; Ronsard, *Odes*, V, 20.

II, Sonnet 10; Ronsard, *Pièces retranchées*, 25 (Dr. Page's "Absence in Spring"); Petrarch, II, 42.

PLAY UPON NAME

Shakespeare plays upon the name of Will; Ronsard plays upon the name of Hélène and Marie; Du Bellay upon that of Olive; and Petrarch upon that of Laura.

STATED NUMBER OF YEARS OF FIDELITY

Shakespeare's Sonnet 104 declares:

Three winters' cold
Have from the forests shook three summers' pride, . . .

A conceit found in Petrarch, Ronsard and Du Bellay.³³

In all the correspondences tabulated in this paper, there is hardly one undoubted instance of direct borrowing on the part of Shakespeare. Influence upon him there was, of course; because he had to take the material that existed. But how did he mold that material? To him sonnetteering was a literary exercise just as well as to the rest; but he never condescended — as they did — to make even a free translation of another man's poem. He was too great to waste his time trifling. He had too much to think and too much to say — and he was bound to say it in a sonnet, if he happened to be writing a sonnet, just as truly as in a play, if he happened to be writing a play. All the sonnets, with two exceptions, are sincere meditations upon life — and let us hope that those two exceptions (153, 154) are not his, or if they must be, that they were written in the adolescent period when his head was turned by Ann Hathaway.

The love conceits of the sonnet literature were not petty by virtue of their essential nature — they were made so by the treatment they received at the hands of the sonnetteers. When Shakespeare took hold of them, he invested them with poetic grandeur. Take for example, that most commonplace of conceits — the supremacy of the sweetheart's beauty. This is as much a conceit as it could well be, being entirely a figment of

³³Cf. DuBellay, *Amours*; Ronsard, *Amours*, I, 213. I cannot at this moment locate a similar sonnet by Petrarch, although I have read it.

the lover's imagination; yet this is how Shakespeare can affirm it (Sonnet 59):

O, that record could with a backward look,
Even of five hundred courses of the Sun,
Show me your image in some antique book,
Since mind at first in character was done!
That I might see what the old world could say
To this composed wonder of your frame.

Or in the following manner (Sonnet 106):

When in the chronicle of wasted time
I see descriptions of the fairest wights,
And beauty making beautiful old rime
In praise of ladies dead and lovely knights;
Then, in the blazon of sweet beauty's best,
Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow,
I see their antique pen would have express'd
Even such a beauty as you master now.

I might quote 30, 90, 91, and any number more of splendid sonnets on trite topics. But Shakespeare did not confine himself to the hackneyed topics. Not only did he give eloquent expression to heartfelt indignation towards contemporary evils, as, for example, in Sonnets 66 to 68, 127, 129, 146 — he made a fundamental departure from the primarily accepted methods of sonnetteering. All the other sonnetteers addressed themselves to a woman,³⁴ and a beautiful woman only — Shakespeare addresses himself to a *man*, and to an *ill-favored* woman. He thus considerably extended the scope of the sonnet as a medium for the genuine reflection of life's tragedies.

In addressing his love to man, he very likely had Plato in his mind. In addressing his love to an ill-favored woman, he opposed the Neo-Platonic doctrine that love is born of beauty. His consciousness of her physical and moral defects supply new themes to sonnet literature; and Mr. Lee is beside the mark when he contends that Shakespeare imitated the vituperative sonnets of Jodelle and others: for, whereas in the latter case the lover is disillusioned when his love ends, in the former he sees the truth all the time and his love does not end. He is again beside

³⁴I speak only of love-sonnets, for Shakespeare wrote only such.

the mark when he says: "It was the exacting conventions of the sonnetteering contagion, and not his personal experiences or emotions, that impelled Shakespeare to give 'the dark lady' a poetic being."

I have found only two instances outside of Shakespeare where the epithet "dark" is applied the beloved, and one of them is doubtful. There are probably more, but the "dark lady" was certainly not one of the "*exacting* conventions." It unquestionably *was* "his personal experiences or emotions, that impelled Shakespeare to give 'the dark lady' a poetic being." This does not by any means affirm that the sonnets are autobiographical. Indeed, it seems to me that had Shakespeare had such a love affair, he would not have made it public.

John Benson in 1640, justly estimated the superiority of Shakespeare's sonnets, when he said: "Yet the lines (of the sonnets) will afford you a more authentic approbation than my assurance any way can to invite your allowance; in your perusal you shall find them serene, clear, elegantly plain,—such gentle strains as shall recreate and not perplex the brain. No intricate or cloudy stuff to puzzle your intellect, but perfect eloquence, such as will raise your admiration to his praise."

The other sonnetteers produced intricate and cloudy stuff that puzzled the intellect and perplexed the brain. This was inevitably so. for they had nothing of their own to say, or that they thought worth saying. Their eyes were turned to the past where they saw a linguistic ideal they strove to imitate. Their practice was characteristic of the whole history of European literature, exclusive of the drama, for more than a hundred years before Shakespeare. The curtain had been raised from the past, and men were too much awestruck to dare do anything, or to think of doing anything, but study and copy what was there revealed to their gaze. Such a mighty genius as Shakespeare, however, took what the Renaissance had to offer him as useful material; and then, with face forward, set to work to *create*.

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APPENDIX

The following comparative table will reveal at a glance the interesting chronological relation between the English and the French sonnetteering vogue. It does not claim any sort of completeness, but it serves its purpose.

| ENGLAND | FRANCE |
|--|--|
| 1542—Wyatt died. | 1544—Maurice Scève, <i>Délie</i> , (a sequence of dixains.) |
| | 1549—DuBellay, <i>Deffence et Illustration de la Langue Francoise</i> . (Written in 1548.) |
| | 1549—DuBellay, <i>L' Olive</i> . |
| | 1552—DeBaïf, <i>Les Amours de Méline</i> . |
| | 1553—Gillaume des Autels, <i>Amoureux Repos</i> . |
| | 1553—Olivier de Magny, <i>Amours, Soupirs</i> , etc. |
| | 1555—DeBaïf, <i>Amours de Francine</i> . |
| | 1555—Labé, <i>Œuvres</i> . |
| | 1555—Vauquelin de la Fresnaye, <i>Foresteries</i> . |
| 1557—Tottel's "Miscellany." | 1560—Ronsard, <i>Œuvres</i> . |
| 1569—Spenser translates from Du Bellay and Petrarch. | 1565—DuBellay, <i>Regrets</i> . |
| | 1572—Boétie, <i>Œuvres</i> . |
| | 1573—Taille, <i>Œuvres</i> . |
| | 1574—Jodelle, <i>Œuvres Poétiques</i> . |
| | 1575—Jamyn, <i>Amours</i> . |
| | 1575—Desportes, <i>Premières Œuvres</i> . |
| | 1576—Belleau, <i>Amours</i> . |
| | 1579—Claude de Pontoux, <i>L'Idée</i> . |
| | 1580—DeBrach, <i>Amours d'Aymée</i> . |

ENGLAND

- 1582—Watson, "Hekatompathia."
 1586—Sidney died.
 1591—Sidney, "Astrophel and Stella."
 1592—Daniel, "Delia."
 1592—Constable, "Diana."
 1593—Barnes, "Parthenophil and Parthenope."
 1593—Watson, "Tears of Fancie."
 1593—Lodge, "Phillis."
 1594—Drayton, "Idea."
 1594—Percy, "Coelia."
 1595—Barnfield, "Sonnets."
 1595—Spenser, "Amoretti."
 1595—E. C. "Emaricdulfe."
 1595—Davies, "Gulling Sonnets."
 1596—Linche, "Diella."
 1596—Griffin, "Fidessa."
 1596—Wm. Smith, "Chloris."
 1597—Tofte, "Laura."

FRANCE

- 1584—Collective edition of Ronsard